

### 3. Chicago's Great Upheaval of 1877: Class Polarization and Democratic Politics

RICHARD SCHNEIROV

The raw violence and widespread bitterness of feeling attending the great upheaval that shook Chicago during the late July days of 1877 were not only part of the nationwide railroad strike but were integral to the turbulent socioeconomic and political change that was transforming Chicago in the 1860s and 1870s. The strike and riot brought to a crisis point the increasing polarization of two emerging industrial classes: on the one hand, large-scale employers and allied property owners, and on the other, a new immigrant, industrial working class. That polarization, in turn, created a major problem for democratic politics: could majority rule exercised by professional politicians, who were responsive to those who had no income-producing property to protect, be reconciled with the existence of an industrial capitalist order?

On the eve of the Civil War, Chicago was an outpost of the East, a "gateway city" in which finished goods from the East were transshipped to the city's hinterlands in exchange for primary products, including grain, lumber, coal, and ore. The city's economy emphasized wholesaling, transportation, banking, and insurance to the detriment of manufacturing; and real estate speculators and promoters of trade known as "boosters" ran the government. The making of Chicago into the nation's railroad hub, the explosive population growth of the city and its Midwest hinterland, and the trade disruptions occasioned by the war, which led large numbers of eastern manufacturers to relocate in Chicago, changed that. Between 1860 and 1870, Chicago's popu-



lation increased 2.7-fold to 299,000 (the city increased another 67 percent in the following decade), and the dollar amount invested in manufacturing grew sevenfold. The scale of the city's manufacturing establishments grew accordingly, reaching the average level of Philadelphia's by 1870. Chicago's largest industry was meatpacking, which produced about one-quarter of the city's entire manufacturing output. The hothouse development of this period swamped the old booster elite, generating a modern capitalist class, whose profits derived as much from the employment of labor as from mercantile activities.<sup>1</sup>

By 1870, Chicago was also a working-class city, with 38 percent of its population employed on the basis of wage-labor, about the same percentage as in eastern cities. The city's workforce was 69 percent foreign born. Approximately one-quarter of all workers were of German parentage, 19 percent were Irish, 8 percent British, and 17 percent other nationalities. Despite workers' ethnic diversity and the divergence in views between Irish and Germans regarding slavery, the Civil War era witnessed Chicago's first great labor upheaval. Nineteen different unions emerged during or immediately after the war, all of them multiethnic associations governed by skilled craftsmen and oriented toward striking. In 1865, twenty-four local unions were affiliated with the city's new Trades Assembly, representing 8,500 workers, about 28 percent of the city's workforce. The most well-known labor leader, Andrew Cameron, published a local labor newspaper of national repute, *The Workingman's Advocate*. In 1867, at the height of labor's influence, Chicago's unions, with the support or acquiescence of the city's political establishment, mounted a general strike for the eight-hour day. In a foretaste of the future, Chicago's unskilled factory hands, helpers, and general laborers joined the conflict in a series of riotous crowd actions that police ultimately suppressed.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of new classes functional to the city's industrial economy created new social and economic requirements in the great city of the West, which could not be effectively served by the city's existing political and governmental apparatus, then in the hands of "ring" politicians of ill-repute. By the early 1870s, a series of dramatic events precipitated this clash of need and structure, setting the stage for the great collision of 1877.

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 and the subsequent rebuilding effort inaugurated a three-year crisis in class relations. Reflecting the lack of confidence of the city's "best men" in local government, the mayor transferred city policing immediately after the fire to the U.S. Army under Gen. Phillip Sheridan. Acceding to widespread fears that "indiscriminate" distribution of relief aid would exacerbate the city's existing labor shortage and raise the cost of rebuilding, he also turned over the collection and disbursement of relief money to



the Relief and Aid Society, a private body run by members of the city's Yankee establishment. Meanwhile, under threat that eastern insurance companies would withdraw their coverage, which, together with high wages, might precipitate a flight of eastern and European capital, the city's upper classes united to help place in the mayor's seat the *Chicago Tribune's* editor, the Republican Joseph Medill. To appease the New York-based insurance companies, the new mayor attempted to institute and then enforce an ordinance eliminating flammable wood-built structures from the commercial center of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Disaster struck these efforts to restore and firm up economic ties with the outside capital when Medill decided to enforce the law mandating Sunday closing for saloons, an ordinance that had lain dormant for almost two decades. Though popular among native-born pietistic Protestants as a way of restoring social stability, it infuriated the Germans, most of whom had voted Republican, and therefore splintered the Republican Party coalition that had ruled the city since 1857. By 1873, a coalition of ex-German Republican and ex-Irish Democratic ethnic politicians had joined forces to form the anti-temperance People's Party, which swept to power in the November elections. The new party declined to enforce the new fire limits and soon repealed the odious temperance law. More significantly, when the Depression of 1873-78 arrived, the People's Party governed the city in ways that undermined the business confidence of the Yankee Protestant upper class.<sup>4</sup>

With approximately 20 percent of the manufacturing workforce unemployed, many of them single male immigrants attracted to the city by the rebuilding effort, a new group of German-speaking labor leaders, the city's first self-proclaimed socialists, stepped into the breach. The *Sozial Politischer Arbeiterverein* (Social Political Workers' Society), loosely affiliated with Karl Marx's First International, mobilized thousands of unemployed men in a series of marches to demand either municipally supplied jobs or relief in the form of disbursement of the remaining fire relief funds held by the Relief and Aid Society. In other cities impromptu coalitions of labor reformers, trade unionists, and socialists raised similar demands, but in Chicago, where socialist leadership of the movement was uncontested, it raised the specter in the press of another Paris Commune and opened a deep rift in the labor movement between labor reformers and German-speaking socialists. With its political base threatened, the People's Party moved left. People's Party Mayor Harvey Colvin voiced support for the "mob's" demand that the Society turn over its funds, which led to four times the amount of relief being paid out that winter to the indigent. The People's Party-controlled city council also tried to launch a job-creating public works program in the form of a new courthouse.<sup>5</sup>



At this critical juncture the political pendulum swung back in the other direction. Another large fire hit the city in July 1874. Though not as catastrophic as the one of 1871, it had a more profound impact on local politics. Faced with the prospect, as Horace White of the *Chicago Tribune* put it, of "the withdrawal of capital from the city, the departure of our most energetic citizens, the diversion of population, trade, and wealth away from us, and the dwarfing of Chicago to the dimension of a second or third-rate town," leading Chicagoans of property united, including the German, former Republican, now People's Party leader, Anton Hesing. A week later one hundred of the city's top business leaders formed the Citizens Association. The new association sought to lead the city into compliance with the Fire Insurance Underwriters' Association's demands for an extension of the fire limits, the professionalization and depoliticization of the city's police and fire departments, and a centralization in the hands of the mayor of the entire fragmented municipal administration, with its township governments and independent boards.<sup>6</sup>

The Citizens Association was the first social organization of the new capitalist class that frankly articulated that stratum's pressing needs and fears and sought to harness municipal government to the requirements of the new economy. The most urgent requirement of the day was to restore the investor confidence of eastern and foreign sources of capital accumulation by establishing a centralized and professionalized city administration where it touched on such industry affairs as fire protection. Its primary fear was that machine politicians like those in the People's Party would use government to redistribute wealth downward by taxing the holders of large-scale property to pay for job programs, and undermine pecuniary incentives in the labor market by disbursing relief funds indiscriminately.

The Citizens Association was frankly distrustful of the masses of new immigrant workers, whose democratic participation it blamed for the professional politicians. As Franklin MacVeagh, the Association's first president, put it, "the immoderate fancy for the freedom of all human males above the age of twenty-one years . . . [has] pretty much succeeded, in our great cities at least, in binding hand and foot the best part of the community, and placing political power in the hands of the baser elements of the people." Echoing an older discourse that linked the preservation of a republic with property holding, MacVeagh wondered aloud in his address how the "protection of property" was possible with a government of men with "no property to protect." These antidemocratic, anti-working class sentiments closely paralleled the national-level retreat of Republican "liberals" from support of Reconstruction governments in the South whose corruption was blamed on the voting power of the newly enfranchised freedmen.<sup>7</sup>



The Citizens Association sought to unify holders of capitalist property under its wing in new ways. It transcended partisan political loyalties by remaining aloof from party identification and electoral politics. In contrast to the old boosters, its leaders eschewed direct office holding and the established leadership of evangelical Protestant churches. It displaced and pushed into abeyance many of the issues and concerns that had structured politics in the Civil War-Reconstruction era, notably, sectional divisions with regard to the conduct of Reconstruction, soft money versus hard money, high tariff versus free trade, and temperance and nativism versus personal liberty. Not least, it was a politics unapologetically based on the existing class polarization and hostility to the sort of democracy embodied in "ring" or machine politics.<sup>8</sup>

By 1877, the reform liberals were largely triumphant in the city and in Republican Party state counsels. Under pressure from the Citizens Association, the city administration professionalized the fire department, the police began enforcing the new fire limits, and Chicago's electorate supported a new charter that abolished independent boards and centralized the powers of appointment and removal in the hands of the mayor. The Citizens Association also collected funds to recruit and pay white-collar clerks and bookkeepers to man the first "businessman's militia." When the militia, together with local police, intimidated socialists into staying home from a planned demonstration on the Relief and Aid Society in April 1875, the socialists formed their own militia, the *Lehr- und Wehr-Verein*. In response, the Citizens Association urged state legislators to formulate legislation establishing a comprehensive military code, which passed in May 1877. Two years later the Association successfully lobbied legislators to prohibit private militia companies and ban public drilling without the governor's permission, provisions aimed at the socialists and their foreign-born constituency.<sup>9</sup>

In 1876 the upper-class assault on machine politics reached a crescendo. In the wake of further spectacular revelations of local corruption, Chicago's "better sort" fielded a bipartisan slate of candidates for mayor and the city council in April. The People's Party mayor suffered a convincing defeat, and the *Chicago Tribune* estimated that twenty-eight of the thirty-six new aldermen elected were "respectable." Though a new election had to be called because of a court suit, a hastily called special polling resulted in the victory of an anti-ring candidate, Republican Monroe Heath.<sup>10</sup>

On the eve of the 1877 strikes, the array of political opportunities for the formation of organized movements among workers was highly unfavorable. Unlike 1867, when Republicans supported the eight-hour day, or the 1872-74 period, when an administration friendly to immigrant workers and unions had controlled city hall, in 1877 the liberal forces in power feared that any



labor organizing or political initiative favorable to workers would either stymie needed political reforms or feed the socialist menace to property and order. The inability of mainstream politicians to offer viable appeals to workers during the long depression created an opening for the socialists to take leadership of the labor movement. The particular constellation of circumstances in Chicago contrasted with many eastern cities, where machine politicians were able to offer inducements to workers to "immunize" them from socialist appeals.<sup>11</sup>

The intransigence of the local establishment only reinforced the impact of the 1873–78 depression on the labor movement. Even at the height of the labor upsurge of 1864–72, only two unions—the typographers and stonecutters—were powerful enough to control wages and working conditions in their trade. Among other unions, membership and bargaining strength and ability to enforce a closed shop fluctuated wildly according to seasonal and business cycles. Following the 1867 eight-hour day strike, the Trades Assembly declined into insignificance and by 1870 had been displaced by the German Trades Assembly. With the coming of the depression and widespread wage-cutting in response to falling prices, organized labor activity of all types almost came to a halt. Nonetheless, among German-speaking central Europeans—Germans, Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians—the level of organization and morale remained high. Already a thriving community-based movement culture was emerging among Chicago socialists that paralleled that of the socialists in imperial Germany, one that included a party press, periodic parades, picnics, meetings, militia drills, and yearly celebrations of the Paris Commune. Given the decline of multiethnic labor unions, this culture, together with the rump organizations among German-speaking workers, would play a major mobilizing role in the 1877 strikes and riots.<sup>12</sup>

Less than a month before the great strike was to begin, the great depression of the 1870s seemed to have reached its nadir. Seeking to avoid bankruptcy, employers ran their businesses at a loss, wages fell to their lowest point, and unemployed workingmen tramped the country. In Chicago as elsewhere the sight or prospect of unemployed workers wandering the countryside or thronging city streets became visible reminders of spreading crime, bomb-throwing "Mollie McGuires," or foreign-born communists. On July 2, a new Illinois vagrant law went into effect that allowed police for the first time to arrest without warrant "any one who goes about begging; . . . persons who do not support themselves or their families; and those who take lodgings in the open air or unoccupied houses or barns and give no accounts of themselves."<sup>13</sup>

On the railroads, the nation's largest industry, court-appointed receivers



ran bankrupt rail lines to get business in any way possible; these lines set the standard for fratricidal rate-cutting wars that pushed the country's railroads to the brink of insolvency. In spring 1877, the large railroads decided to pass along their losses to their employees in wages cuts starting at 10 percent—on top of earlier cuts of approximately 20 percent. In April the only viable railroad union, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, balked at the cuts but suffered defeat at the hands of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad. Nonetheless, on July 16 a virtually spontaneous strike began among brakemen of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad at Camden Junction, Maryland. The strike, marked by the stopping of trains, seizing and destruction of railroad property, and violent clashes with police and militia, spread rapidly into New York state along the New York Central lines and into Baltimore, Reading, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, along the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad lines. Louisville, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis, plus a host of smaller cities such as Terre Haute, Indiana, would also experience strikes. In many cities, the rail strike quickly spread to workers in other industries, and the dispatch of the militia by authorities sparked widespread rioting and violence. In Pittsburgh on July 21, the militia sent from Philadelphia to protect strikebreakers fired into a crowd of railroaders, killing at least twenty workers and prompting a crowd swelled with sympathizers to burn the rail yard.<sup>14</sup>

Leading Chicagoans, still embroiled in debates over reform of municipal governance, suffered through the fourth year of depression, with somewhere between fifteen and thirty thousand unemployed. Leaders felt anxious about immigrant workers' simmering restiveness, and were ill disposed to take a sober-minded view of events in Baltimore and Pittsburgh. The *Tribune* termed the great strike "Civil War," and "Fever," and described a country "surging with suppressed excitement," while the *Inter Ocean* dubbed it "America's First Great Revolution." Though the local press expressed sympathy for the real grievances of railroad workers and offered various remedies for the unrestrained cutthroat competition that had precipitated the wage cutting, only the upstart tabloid, *Chicago Daily News*, backed workers' right to assemble and strike once mob action mushroomed out of control in Pittsburgh.<sup>15</sup>

The most ominous development for authorities was the aggressive role taken by the socialists, now part of the Workingmen's Party of the United States (WPUS). Founded the previous year in Pittsburgh, but headquartered in Chicago, the WPUS, 4,500 members strong, had temporarily settled its internal division between electorally oriented Lassalleans and trade union- and strike-oriented Marxists—which boded well for relating to the strike once begun. In Chicago, its largely foreign-born and German-speaking constituency could for the first time present an English-speaking face. Chicago-



based national president chairman Philip Van Patten was native born and a fluent speaker. Three other effective leaders had recently been "converted" to socialism by Peter J. McGuire, the socialist founder of the carpenters' union, when he visited the city in 1876. Now representing the party before the public were George Schilling, a bilingual German-born cooper, who would later become an influential Knights of Labor and (nonphysical-force) anarchist; Thomas J. Morgan, a British-born machinist, poised to become the city's leading advocate of independent socialist involvement in electoral politics; and the charismatic Albert Parsons, a tramping printer of old American stock, recently arrived in Chicago, with his African American wife Lucy, from Texas, where they had been Radical Republicans. The new English speakers, however, were close to the Lassalleian wing of the party in their favoring of the ballot over trade union action.<sup>16</sup>

On Saturday, July 21, all eyes were on the railroad workers. While skilled and semiskilled workers averaged \$2.00 a day, unskilled laborers received a full dollar less, making it difficult to impossible to support a family. Talk circulated among employees of the Rock Island & Pacific, Lake Shore & Michigan Southern, and Illinois Central railroads of a strike against recent wage cuts. Since Friday, WPUS leaders had been agitating for a strike, assuring railroaders of support. That night the party held a packed solidarity rally in Sacks Hall, decorated with large banners displaying slogans, including "Down with Wages-Slavery," "Why Does Our Production Causes Starvation?" and "We Want Work, Not Charity." Though the main speaker, Albert Parsons, did not advocate violence or revolution, portentous talk emanated from the working-class audience of applying the "Pittsburgh solution" to the Chicago problem.<sup>17</sup>

That same day, the party's Chicago-based national executive committee met to ask its members to "render all possible moral and substantial assistance to our brethren" now on strike. It promulgated the party's program of nationalization of the railroads and telegraph lines and establishment of the eight-hour day as a solution to unemployment and falling wages. Still, it was only in Chicago and St. Louis that the attempt to offer leadership to the great strike would meet with any success. Those cities had workforces dominated by German-speaking immigrants and small but significant numbers of party members based among them.<sup>18</sup>

At the newspaper offices downtown on Sunday, large crowds gathered for the latest word on the strike. All the newspapers came out with extra editions. For the *Chicago Tribune* it was the first since the Civil War. Again, Albert Parsons addressed a crowd packed "almost to suffocation" into Sacks Hall. That night Parsons spoke to a smaller audience of unionized railroad



switchmen while mounted on a fireplug. He counseled them to "strike while the anvil is hot," and promised support.<sup>19</sup>

On Monday, July 23, it seemed only a matter of time before events similar to Pittsburgh overtook the rail center of the nation. Railroad workers from different lines gathered in small knots throughout the rail yards to discuss grievances and plan action. Meanwhile, fearing property damage like that which had befallen Pittsburgh and seeking to forestall or contain a strike, many railroad officials in the city indicated they would cancel their freight runs, leaving their rolling stock on tracks outside the city. The North Western & Chicago, Danville & Vincennes Railroads restored the pay cut of some or all of their workers; other lines discussed doing the same. In secret conclave with police chief Michael Hickey and militia commanders, Mayor Heath decided to assemble the militia in readiness for action, but reportedly decided not to board trains, escort strikebreakers, or "do anything to precipitate violence." Later reports indicated that the mayor instructed police either to use blanks in their pistols or fire over the heads of rioters if provoked. Though that decision probably forestalled property damage to the railroads, it would be widely questioned by leading citizens once the strikes and riots had begun in earnest.<sup>20</sup>

All day, socialists leafleted the working-class districts advertising an evening mass meeting for the third consecutive day. The republican rhetoric of the leaflet reflected the influence of the new English-speaking leadership of the party. It asked workingmen, "Have You No Rights?—No Ambition? No Manhood?" The circular went on to accuse the dominant liberals, whom it referred to as "money lords," of conspiring to restrict the vote to property holders and return to a monarchy. Obviously this fear originated in the agitation of the Chicago Citizens Association three years earlier, but concern about the vote may have been intensified by a controversial New York state constitutional amendment then at issue that would have barred almost 70 percent of all voters from participating in fiscal decision making in cities. Drawing on the nineteenth century's equal rights tradition, the leaflet contrasted the new tramp law and the state law against workers' combinations to the uncontrolled combining by their employers to reduce wages. "These aristocrats refuse to pay their taxes! HOW LONG WILL YOU BE MADE FOOLS OF?"<sup>21</sup>

That night one of the largest gatherings the city had known crowded into the intersection of Market and Madison streets downtown. The size of the gathering, somewhere between ten and thirty thousand, made it necessary for six speaker rostrums to be erected.<sup>22</sup> John McAuliffe, the only Socialist to sanction forcible resistance, warned that "if capital fired on their Fort Sumter,"



the newspaper report ran, "he swore by the yet warm bodies and radiant spirits of their martyred dead who had been brutally murdered at Pittsburgh . . . his thought and voice would be raised for Bloody War (cheering)." The eloquent Parsons was the main attraction, and he did not disappoint. In an ironic allusion to the Grand Army of the Republic (the post-Civil War veterans' organization and mainstay of the Republican Party) that any of his listeners would have understood, Parsons addressed his listeners as the "Grand Army of Starvation." He continued:

Fellow workers, let us recollect that in this Great Republic that has been handed down to us by our forefathers from 1776, that while we have the Republic, we still have hope. A mighty spirit is animating the hearts of the American people today. When I say the American people I mean the backbone of the country—the men who till the soil, guide the machine, who weave the material and cover the backs of civilized men. We are a portion of that people. Our brothers . . . have demanded of those in possession of the means of production . . . that they be permitted to live and that those men do not appropriate the life to themselves, and that they be not allowed to turn us upon the earth as vagrants and tramps. . . . We have come together this evening, if it is possible, to find the means by which the great gloom that now hangs over our Republic can be lifted and once more the rays of happiness can be shed on the face of this broad land.<sup>23</sup>

As the throng swelled beyond the point where any single speaker could be heard, additional rostrums were improvised at different locations. Speakers arose spontaneously to address the audience. One of the few whose words were recorded was an Irish Union Army veteran who had fought at Shiloh: "The Black man has been fought for; and we have given him the ballot; the people have shown an interest in him, and have done all they can to bring him up to the point where he could compete with the white man. Now why not do something for the workingman? . . . I was through the war. I fought for the big bugs—the capitalists—and many of you have done the same. And what is our reward now? What have the capitalists done for us?"<sup>24</sup>

The theme of corruption of the republic by an oligarchy of wealth, and the veteran's complaint of betrayal and disinheritance would echo in the actions of strikers and rioters in the days to come.

The strike, inaugurated formally on Monday by the railroaders, was prosecuted in earnest on Tuesday, July 24. Mobile crowds—what the *Inter Ocean* called "roaming committees of strikers"—traveled from workplace to workplace calling out employees on strike. To the bulk of the press this manner of striking made participants into a dangerous mob, in part because it attracted sympathizers and hangers-on not directly interested in the strike, in part be-



cause it extralegally appropriated public thoroughfares as its theater of action, and in part because it involved coercion of proprietors and other workers. Thus, while occasionally referring to crowds as strikers aided by sympathizers both wanted and unwanted, for the most part the press characterized them as composed of, according to one account, "hordes of ragamuffins, vagrants, saloon bummers, and generally speaking the dregs of the population." This was almost certainly a distortion.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed the method of striking did not differ much from that of existing unions. Early unions, before they were able to sustain membership loyalty, employ paid, full time leadership, or rely on bargaining relations with employers, were usually makeshift operations that coalesced members only in times of strike. Typically they resorted to crowd actions and the enthusiasm of the moment, often supplied by brass bands — the "bandwagon effect." This was especially the case with unions that enrolled significant number of unskilled workers. In the early to mid-1870s Chicago had boasted a number of unions that enrolled these types of workers, including the carpenters, painters, sailors, and coopers, the largest unions, the Laborer's Benevolent Society (dockhands) and the Knights of Saint Crispin (boot and shoemakers), each had more than five hundred members when the depression started. The organizational experience of these workers may help explain the ease with which large numbers of workers, unskilled as well as skilled, became involved in strike actions in 1877.<sup>26</sup>

A more complex explanation is required to understand why crowds almost immediately thought to broaden strikes at their places of employment, their particular trades, or their industries into industrial strikes and a general strike of all industries. Certainly, part of the reason was the example afforded by strikes in other cities, which, while originating in the grievances of railroaders, quickly drew in workers in other industries because the issue of wage cutting was generalized across the working class. Indeed on Sunday and Monday, mass meetings in St. Louis and Kansas City had declared general strikes, which, with the acquiescence or support of authorities, lasted through the rest of the week. Another part of the explanation may lie in the precedent of the 1867 Chicago general strike for the eight-hour day. Though begun by organized skilled tradesmen, it had quickly mushroomed into a strike of the unskilled relying on mobile crowd actions. But, the larger part of the explanation lies in the mid-1870s defeat of machine politicians by the Citizens Association and the subsequent prominence of the socialists in the early stages of the Chicago events. Before crowd actions became general, the socialists alone had offered the railroad workers support and encouragement, had suggested a program of the eight hour day that spoke to the interests of



all workers, including the unemployed, and unlike English-speaking labor reformers, still maintained an organizational base among an important segment of Chicago's workers.<sup>27</sup>

The initiators of the crowd action on Tuesday were a small group of Michigan Central switchmen, soon joined by freight hands and teenage apprentices. The crowd of several hundred was led by a handful of railroaders, the acknowledged chief of which was a discharged railroad hand named John Hanlon, a "dark complexioned man with chinwhiskers and a pipe in his mouth." Carrying pine sticks, the men marched south along the tracks stopping at the Baltimore & Ohio, Rock Island & Chicago, and Alton freight shops. There was no opposition from police. At each stop Hanlon, attempting to persuade rather than intimidate, led a small delegation inside the shop. Not all employees suspended work voluntarily, but railroad officials, evidently instructed to avoid property damage at all costs, generally told all hands to go home when confronted with the crowd. At one yard, employees didn't want to quit, saying that their pay cut had been restored. Hanlon asked if the restoration applied to all employees on the line. When told that it didn't, he responded that "they were working for the rights of all" and that work must cease until wages had been restored to all employees.<sup>28</sup>

An offshoot of the crowd boarded a train to the Southside where it tried to spread the strike to the packinghouses. The men visited each establishment and after securing a verbal agreement to restore wage cuts, raised a cheer for the employers.<sup>29</sup>

During this time, Bohemian lumbershovers, at least some of whom were socialists or socialist influenced, commenced a strike for the third year in a row. It was the first time the strike had spread beyond the railroads. The crowd of about two thousand roamed throughout the lumber district driving out the few men remaining on the job, and then moved on to close the brickyards and stove works.

By the late afternoon, the strike was no longer confined to the railroads. Not only had the lumbershovers joined spontaneously, but the strike had spread to the heavily industrialized area just west of the Chicago River. Bands of workers and teenagers roamed up and down Canal, Clinton, and Jefferson streets shutting shops and factories. One group, led by a tall brawny man named Flinn, attempted to convince workers to strike of their own volition. Many did, but in other cases, as the crowd approached, proprietors closed their shops and factories and sent their employees home before they could call a strike. At least one group of employees in this region, German and Bohemian furniture workers, many of whom were socialists, joined the crowd.

As yet there had been no interference by police, and the mood of the



crowd was exuberant, like being "out on holiday," a disapproving reporter noted. Every instance of shutdown was lustily cheered and buoyed the crowd's enthusiasm. Occasionally, there were shouts of "Vive la Liberté" and "Down with the Thieving Monopolies." One Bohemian, with the assent of his Irish companion, attempted to start up "The Marseillaise," the anthem of the French Revolution, now sung as well by socialists and free thinkers.

Later that day, Tom Littleton, a discharged railroad hand, led one section of the West Side crowd to his former place of employment, where it shut down the freight depot. Another portion stopped at Fortune's Brewery for free beer dispensed by an anxious owner. At Monroe and Franklin, two hundred shoemakers, led by a small delegation, closed two factories before being dispersed by police. Late in the afternoon, a self-described "committee of sailors" distributed a circular calling for a wage raise, but few sailors were in port, and the strike had to wait.

At least half of most crowds were young men between the ages of twelve and nineteen. "It seems strange," remarked a *Tribune* reporter, "that full grown men should at the bidding of half grown men and boys quit their work, but so it was." In fact, the phenomenon should not have seemed so strange. In an era before effective compulsory education, half grown men and boys were important elements of the city's growing industrial workforce, working as apprentices, helpers, and more generally in the sweated trades. Though, no doubt, many were attracted for thrills, others understood the crowd actions as being in their interest. Thus, one boy, on being asked by a reporter why he was striking, replied, "No man ought to work for less'n a dollar 'n a half" [a day].<sup>30</sup>

The WPUS continued to try to organize a general strike for a 20 percent wage increase and the eight-hour day. A socialist circular called on workers to appoint delegates to a provisional strike committee. Though a minority of the committee wanted the party to support the crowd actions, the Lassallean-tending majority opinion, as expressed in the circular, urged strikers to "keep quiet" until an orderly strike could be planned. The city's business leaders, however, accused the socialists of inciting the strikes and crowd actions and were fearful of future consequences. That afternoon, they took matters into their own hands. Albert Parsons, the most influential socialist, found himself fired from his job as printer at the *Chicago Times* and detectives escorted him to city hall. There, in the company of the police chief and more than thirty Board of Trade businessmen and aldermen, he and WPUS chairman Van Patten were browbeaten and threatened with lynching. They were saved from arrest only because the authorities feared creating martyrs, and they released the men on the promise to absent themselves from strike



activity for twenty four hours "Parsons, your life is in danger," said Police Chief Hickey, before he was freed. "Everything you say or do is made known to me . . . Do you know you are liable to be assassinated any moment on the street? Why, those board of trade men would as leave hang you to a lamp post as not." Meanwhile, the mayor issued a proclamation calling for citizen patrols in local neighborhoods and for closing all saloons.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of the WPUS circular, a crowd of about three thousand gathered Tuesday evening at the spot of the previous night's rally. The socialists, their leaders intimidated into silence and inaction, were absent, but the police were not. A phalanx of bluecoats charged the peaceable gathering, clubbing indiscriminately and firing over the heads of the panic-stricken crowd. The police ignored a rival meeting of labor reformers and twenty trade union delegates, who met to endorse the railroad strike, but whose emphasis was on currency reform as a solution to the depression.

The police attack on the WPUS meeting was the first during the strike in which widespread clubbing and shooting had been used to disperse a peaceful crowd. It set a precedent for a pattern of police violence against working-class crowd actions that would transform them into an armed confrontation; it also further intimidated the socialists and precluded them from organizing a more effective general strike. That such a strike was possible was evident from the Kansas City and St. Louis general strikes that same week.

The next day, Wednesday, July 25, with no attempt being made to run freight trains or provide police escorts to strikebreakers, the center of the strike's gravity shifted to the city's main industrial areas. The composition of the crowds also changed. Teenagers composed a large portion of Tuesday's crowds; adult workingmen dominated Wednesday's crowds.

Now that the strike had developed into crowd actions, the policy of local authorities toward the crowd changed. The *Chicago Tribune* described a debate going on among city and business leaders. One faction, consisting of "the mayor and his advisors," counseled police restraint to avoid bloodshed and property damage. The other, led by the city's press and business leaders, argued that "by allowing the crowds to run wild through the streets, the riot was but abetted, because . . . persons who had no idea of joining the innumerable gangs would, by the exercise of a little persuasion, be led in and gradually changed in mind. . . ." By Wednesday this latter faction was in the ascendance.<sup>32</sup>

A delegation of Board of Trade businessmen asked the mayor to call a citizen's meeting in the afternoon. Perhaps sensing the tide of opinion, the mayor opened the gathering at the Moody and Sankey Tabernacle by issuing a proclamation calling on five thousand citizens, composed as much as



possible of ex soldiers, to organize themselves as auxiliaries to the police. The gathering, attended by the city's notables, passed a resolution backing the mayor's call, and the city council followed suit. Only Alderman Frank Lawler, ex-ship carpenter union president from the 1860s and author of the state eight-hour-day law, supported strikers by calling in vain for a public works program to provide employment.<sup>33</sup>

The action resumed early, when between six hundred and eight hundred Bohemian and a number of Polish lumbershovers gathered in the lumber district again. Armed with clubs taken from lumber scrap, they scattered the few employees remaining at work, closed the Union Rolling Stock Company, and advanced on McCormick's Reaper Plant. The crowd, now having grown to about 1,500, was met by a squad of fifty bluecoats. The commander ordered the crowd to disperse, but his words were met with jeers and curses. The lumbershovers were the most combative group of workers in the city, and the Bohemians among them were known as strong socialists. When the police attempted to arrest their leaders, the lumbershovers responded with a shower of stones. The police, who had begun to feel acutely their lack of numbers, fired into the crowd, wounding two and causing a wild retreat. When part of the crowd reassembled on the prairie west of the city, a few of the participants, apparently officers in the Bohemian militia company, talked of calling this unit out to protect their strike. News of such a possibility reached authorities, for on that same day, General Torrence, commander of the National Guard, signed an order disarming the "Bohemian Rifles."<sup>34</sup>

By early afternoon, the entire city was in ferment. A group of South Siders had carried the strike to the North Side by shutting the Chicago Rolling Mills and precipitating a strike of the unskilled tanners along Goose Island on the north branch of the river. On the West Side, crowds patrolled Canal Street to ensure that all factories remained shut. A large contingent of South Side Bridgeport youths and Canal Street "toughs" closed the South Side Street Railway. At the Union Stock Yard in the Town of Lake south of the city, a more organized group of packinghouse workers expelled a group of boys—they wanted to appear respectable—and made their own tour of the packinghouses, forcing the proprietors to sign agreements that raised wages to two dollars a day.<sup>35</sup>

With so many discontented people lining the streets and excitement at such high pitch, any small group of workers with purpose and a target could get up a crowd. Conversely, a large crowd often would melt away just as quickly as it had formed. Many police literally bloodied their feet marching back and forth dispersing crowds that seemed to rise up, disappear, and reappear at random. One notable small crowd of unemployed dockworkers and laborers



gathered near the lake. Finding nearly everything shut down, an Irish boat hand climbed up on an abandoned flatcar to make a speech:

Look at me. . . do I look like a loafer or a laboring man?" [in apparent response to press characterizations of the crowd] The crowd yelled and cheered and assured him that was one of them. "Of course I am," he said. "I am as honest a workingman as ever worked in a shop. Look at my hands. . . These hands show what I am. We know what we're fighting for and what we're doing. We're fighting those God-damn capitalists. That is what we're doing. Aint we? . . . Let us kill those damned aristocrats." He had been a railroad worker himself once, he said, and knew what he was talking about. They had the thing started, and they were going to keep it going until those big bugs had been put down."

The city was now preparing itself for a full-scale insurrection, even though the violent confrontations were rooted in police attacks on nonviolent crowds. Two companies of the U.S. Army arrived in the city at the request of the governor, who had responded to the mayor's request the day before. They had lately been battling Sioux in the Dakotas. In a revealing metaphor, the *Tribune* headlined "Red War" the next day, conjuring up at once images of insurrectionary Communists, Indian savages, and the spilling of blood. While the bronzed and grizzled veterans won cheers from businessmen and clerks downtown, they fielded jeers and catcalls from Canal Street crowds as they marched west along Madison Street to the Exposition Building.<sup>3</sup>

In response to the mayor's proclamation the previous day, the city's propertied middle classes had begun to arm themselves. Field, Leiter & Co. and J. V. Farwell dry goods stores organized companies of armed clerks, as did the Illinois Central Railroad. In the heavily Republican Fourth Ward, three hundred Civil War veterans organized. Citizen patrols formed in a host of wards, but reports of patrols were notably absent in the wards of the foreign born. Despite the feeling conveyed by the press that the city was in the midst of civil war, with a few minor exceptions, neither the armed citizen patrols, the special police, the state militia, nor the U.S. Army saw action; only the Chicago police engaged in battle.

After dinner a crowd of about 1,500 gathered at the Burlington yards. Upon satisfying themselves that the rail lines were not in use, they were about to disperse when a squad of sixteen policemen under Lieutenant Callahan pulled up. Called "peelers" by Irish workers—after the hated Irish constabulary of Sir Robert Peel, manned by native-born Irishmen viewed as turncoats—the police rode headlong into a volley of stones and shouts of defiance. Though the police fired at the crowd with their revolvers, the crowd did not flee. A *Chicago Times* reporter wrote in language reminiscent of the Civil War, "They



faltered not in the least but stood up under fire like war scarred veterans or men resolved to perish for their cause rather than abandon it." Some of the crowd replied to the police fusillade with stones and sporadic fire from their own weapons. Shots were exchanged for fully two minutes until the police ran out of ammunition and fled for their lives. Part of the crowd followed in close pursuit. The roles of the past two days had been reversed, and for the first time the crowd had taken the offensive.<sup>38</sup>

The strike, which had turned into an armed confrontation Wednesday night, continued along these lines Thursday morning. Now the scene of crowd activity shifted to the residential communities. By 9 A.M., a crowd of three thousand men, women, and teenagers from surrounding neighborhoods had gathered along Halsted Street between 12th Street and the viaduct at 16th Street. This area of Halsted was narrow, skirted with frame buildings, and could easily be blockaded.<sup>39</sup>

The battle of Halsted Street began when a squad of police attempted to break up the crowd by chasing it south. At 16th Street, confronted by an angry crowd of approximately five thousand, the police emptied their revolvers into the masses of humanity. "Although men were seen to drop away at every minute the mob dragged or carried them away at the instant . . ." When they almost expended their last round of ammunition, the police turned in to headlong retreat north over the viaduct. They were closely followed by the crowd, which pelted them with stones. One officer later admitted, "I was never in such close quarters in my life before."<sup>40</sup> One block later, the police picked up reinforcements and again turned on the crowd, firing and clubbing mercilessly. One member of the crowd that had been shooting at police fell mortally wounded, this had a "sobering effect," and the tide turned once again. But, after the officers had chased the rioters across the river, a "gang of toughs" raised the bridge and isolated a small band of police on the South Side. The police might have suffered grievously had not a small boy turned a lever to lower the bridge and allow a squad of volunteer cavalry to ride to the rescue of the beleaguered peelers.

South Halsted Street, the scene of battle, straddled two working class communities, whose residents made up the single largest group of rioters. Of the eighty-eight casualties reported in the press, 45 percent were boys, nineteen and under. Virtually all those whose addresses were listed lived in the Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh wards. Of the total number of all riot victims identifiable by residence, 42 percent came from the Sixth Ward and 22 percent lived in the Sixth Ward's largely Bohemian Fourth Precinct adjoining the lumberyards.<sup>41</sup> According to the 1880 manuscript census schedules the fourth precinct was 57 percent Bohemian, and half of all heads of families were laborers.<sup>42</sup> The precinct lay in the heart of the Bohemian community known as Pilsen. About



half of the community consisted of free thinkers, recently alienated from the Catholic Church, with strong sympathies for socialism. During the 1877 strikes and riots almost the entire Pilsen community rose up against the police. One disapproving Republican wrote in a letter to the *Tribune*: "I was perhaps the only Bohemian in Chicago who opposed the powerful current of the aroused public feeling of my countrymen."<sup>43</sup>

The other major source of crowd casualties was the Fifth Ward Irish community of Bridgeport. Bridgeport originated as a settlement of Irish and German canal laborers, but by the 1870s was the site of three fast growing industries: brick making, iron and steel making, and slaughtering and meat packing, the latter of which employed upward of twenty thousand at its seasonal peak. In 1875 a reporter commented, "There is probably as much real poverty in Bridgeport as anywhere in the town. It is also the haunt of the roughest characters." A slight majority of all those arrested had Irish surnames, and teenagers with Irish names were two and a half times as likely to be killed as German and Bohemian teenagers.<sup>44</sup>

On Thursday in the midst of the "Battle of Halsted Street," a contingent of five hundred stockyard workers from Bridgeport set out along Archer Avenue to join the Bohemian lumbershovers on Halsted. Many of them were butchers, still wearing their aprons and carrying butcher knives and gambrels for clubs. At the front of the procession two boys carried a banner bearing the words WORKINGMEN'S RIGHTS. The crowd, now swollen to 1,500, was a "determined one," conceded the *Tribune*, composed of "men in every sense of the word—brave and daring in the extreme. . . . When the police called on them to disperse, they vowed they would rather die than return." A desperate battle for possession of the Halsted Street bridge ensued, lasting nearly an hour. "Every inch gained was warmly contested by both sides. If there was a coward in the battle, he could not be detected." Only the arrival of a squad of police reinforcements shooting into the crowd decided the contest, and the stockyard workers retreated to Bridgeport.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the mayor's ordering out of the militia's Second Regiment to the Halsted Street viaduct, the crowd was neither beaten nor overawed. About ten thousand people packed Halsted—mainly on the sidewalks and alleys. The majority were onlookers, but seemingly all were sympathetic to the strike and angry at the police. When the police or cavalry approached, the crowd would part and then close behind them—many chucking stones and pieces of wood. When the police turned on their tormentors, the crowd would melt away into the alleys. Police arrested Mollie Cook and her two sons for firing at them from their Halsted Street home; in the afternoon police ordered shut every window along the street.

When the crowd actions shifted to the neighborhoods, large numbers



of women joined the fray. According to the *Times*, they constituted at least one fifth of every gathering. On Halsted Street, Bohemian women brought stones in their aprons to the men, encouraging them to "clean out and kill the soldiers." Not only did they incite the men, but they engaged in their own resistance. Police detectives roaming the crowd sought out women wearing one stocking on the assumption they had used the other to fill with stones for use as a swinging weapon. In Pilsen on 22nd Street between Fisk and May, Bohemian women gathered in the afternoon at a door and sash manufactory. The reporters' descriptions of the ensuing altercation reflected their dismay at behavior that blatantly violated the norms of middle-class womanhood. 'Dresses were tucked up around the waists' and 'brawny, sunburnt arms brandished clubs' torn from the fence surrounding the factory. When the police arrived to protect the factory from what the *Chicago Inter Ocean* styled an "Outbreak of Bohemian Amazons," they remained firm and stoned the hated bluecoats until they left. The *Tribune* concluded that these immigrant working-class women were "a great deal worse than the men."

Up until Thursday, the organized trade unions had stayed aloof from the crowd actions. On Thursday, a number of trades began holding meetings to discuss striking. But by this time, the police were making no distinction between the proverbial "honest workingman" and the rioters. The coopers, cigarmakers, stonecutters, and tailors all had their meetings proscribed or attacked by police. The most blatant abridgment of the right to free assembly occurred at South Side Turner Hall on Halsted, where three hundred journeymen cabinetmakers had gathered to negotiate with their employers. With no provocation a band of police rushed into the hall, clubbing and shooting indiscriminately. One carpenter, Carl Tessman, was killed, and dozens wounded. Two years later the Harmonia Joiners Society won a suit against the policemen involved, the judge terming their actions a "criminal riot." The Turner Hall incident was remembered by labor for years afterward, and Governor John Peter Altgeld referred to it in his pardon message justifying the freeing of the imprisoned Haymarket anarchists in 1893.<sup>4</sup>

As evening approached, the Battle of Halsted Street subsided. Here and there police exchanged shots with snipers and occasionally cleared out homes, but the high tide of the upheaval had passed. The city was an armed camp, and mobile crowd actions were impossible without immediate opposition. But as street action dwindled, hitherto sporadic attempts of workers to call strikes began producing results. The West Division Street railway stockmen, stonecutters, West Side gas workers, South Side glass workers, and lime kiln workers all went on strike. The majority of railroads, as well as the city's rolling mills, lumber yards, and stockyards, remained closed into the next week.



By then, a significant minority of those involved, notably railroad workers, had won restoration of wage cuts.

Throughout the city's West and South Sides, Irish, Bohemian, German, and Polish families mourned their dead relatives and neighbors, tended the wounded, or attempted to raise bond for the almost two hundred men who had been arrested. Approximately thirty men and boys had been killed—many buried anonymously in lime pits—and another two hundred wounded. Chicago's casualties exceeded that of any other city in the great railroad strike of 1877. No police had been killed and eighteen had been wounded, none seriously.<sup>48</sup>

That Sunday's *Chicago Tribune* contained an editorial by Joseph Medill, entitled "The Dangerous Classes," that offered a rethinking of America's mid-century free-labor faith. Medill argued the thesis that mass immigration, the Civil War, widespread tramping, and the rise of labor union intimidation of employers and strikebreakers had created something hitherto unknown in America: the dangerous classes. "They are governed by their passions; they are coarse in tastes and vicious in habits; they are ignorant and revengeful; they are readily influenced by the worst class of demagogues and revolutionists, and are easily maddened by liquor" Medill advocated enforcing laws against interference with the railroads "at whatever cost. A few lives taken at the first saves human life in the end. . . . A little powder, used to teach the dangerous classes a needful lesson, is well burned, provided there are bullets in front of it." The idea that labor was a dangerous class was far from new. Classical republican doctrine warned against the interested actions of an ungovernable mob as much as it did the tyrannies of oligarchy and monarchy. By the mid-1870s, respectable public opinion endorsed an updated version of this concern in the fear that the new industrial working class was incompatible with the progress of civilization, and that drastic steps might be necessary.<sup>49</sup>

But, far from seeking to destroy modern civilization, labor leaders were busy in the aftermath of 1877 building new, more inclusive institutions of civil society. The aggressive crowd actions—and even more, the myriad instances of unity across lines of skill, trade, ethnicity, religion, and sex—made it clear to many labor leaders that new forms of organization and action for incorporating the unskilled laborers and factory hands were both necessary and possible. The dean of Chicago's Civil War-era labor movement and editor of the *Workingmens Advocate*, Andrew Cameron, admitted that "our unions are isolated and consequently are weak and inefficient. They have no common ties, no sympathy in common with each other and are indifferent to each others' success and elevation." Responding to this widespread perception in August 1877 former Knights of Saint Crispin's leader Richard Griffiths called



the city's first (secret) meeting of the Knights of Labor, a gathering of fifty trade union leaders. A local Knights' historian recalled that the "principal feature" of the new order that "aroused the curiosity of all laboring men was that it embraced all who earned an honest living without distinction of trade. In comparison to the old English system of trade unions, this was a new departure."<sup>50</sup>

The Knights were not the only organization to offer an all-embracing organizational vision to the city's workers. The WPUS socialists, now dominated by Lassalleans, sought to reorganize all trade unions "on socialist principles." At a pivotal December meeting, Chicago labor delegates voted narrowly to reject the secret Knights of Labor and establish a Trade and Labor Assembly (TLA)—with the word "labor" being added to the pre-1877 name "Trades Council"—and elected the now famous Albert Parsons as its first president. As unions sought to revive and reorganize in 1878 and 1879, most ended up joining the socialist-led TLA. Unlike the shadowy Knights, the TLA could offer concrete assistance in the shape of sponsorship of citywide mass meetings and the collection of strike support funds. Not only did German-led unions like the cigarmakers, coopers, furniture workers, silver gilders, clothing cutters, and wood carvers join the TLA, but so did the reviving union of boot- and shoemakers, the KOSC.<sup>51</sup>

During this same period, Irish workers, many of them participants in the 1877 upheaval, formed or revived organizations with a Bridgeport base. In spring 1878, brickmakers founded a protective organization, and sailors revived their union under the leadership of Richard Powers. According to Powers, the 1877 strikes, "although detrimental to some, gave stability and backbone to others. . . . It was then that many of the unions now existing . . . were organized." The most important union to emerge from the 1877 experience was the Butchers and Packinghouse Workers Benevolent Society, the city's first industrial union of the post-1877 era. Fearful that unemployed sailors would cross their picket lines, the skilled butchers decided to expand their organization to laborers with the help of Powers. Initially backed by the local Catholic church, the five thousand-man-strong union mounted a large but ultimately unsuccessful strike of the packinghouses in 1879. When church support faltered, the union turned to socialist-run labor institutions for support.<sup>52</sup>

The WPUS—renamed the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) in December 1877 and under the control of the Lassalleans again—also began to exercise a loose hegemony over the labor movement in electoral politics. The Greenback-oriented Labor League and the WPUS each held mass meetings in August 1877 hoping to attract support from aroused labor voters for the upcoming



county elections. Both organizations frankly sought to don the mantle of 1877, but the largest part of the Labor Leagues leadership at the last minute fused with the Democrats. Though a remnant of the Labor Leaguers joined with the national Greenback Labor Party, it won only 1,673 votes that fall, far fewer than the WPUS total of 6,592. About half of the socialist vote came from the largely German-speaking Fifth, Sixth, and Fourteenth wards. The Sixth Ward's Bohemian precinct adjoining the lumberyards, the core locality of riot victims, delivered the highest socialist vote of any precinct in the city and continued to do so in two of the next three elections. The socialist hegemony in Chicago contrasted with the situation in most other American cities, where Greenback-Labor coalitions came forward as the representatives of discontented labor.<sup>53</sup>

Though the SLP finished a distant third to triumphant Republicans in the 1877 election, its newfound strength made it the center of public attention. The police exaggerated local SLP membership by a factor of ten. Even more menacing, the socialist armed groups assumed public visibility. The *Lehr und Wehr Verein* and the smaller Bohemian Sharpshooters drilled in public and regularly assembled to protect socialist picnics from roughs. The Socialists viewed them as an answer to the armed forces arrayed against them in 1877. "If the police try to break up our meetings as they did at Turner Hall," asserted Albert Parsons, "they will meet foes worthy of their steel." The alarmed Citizens Association raised \$30,000 to fund the First and Second Regiments of the militia and lobbied for a state law effectively banning public drilling.<sup>54</sup>

SLP strength reached its zenith in spring 1879, when it nominated German doctor Ernst Schmidt for mayor. Schmidt's respectability and presumed incorruptibility almost doubled the SLP vote total to twelve thousand, about 19 percent of the total. The bulk of the new voters were the same liberal Germans who had become accustomed to bolting the Republican Party over ethno-class issues beginning in 1873. The resulting diminution of the Republican total allowed a surprise Democratic winner, Carter Harrison I, to claim the mayor's seat. Indeed, the increase in the SLP vote almost precisely equaled Harrison's margin of victory.<sup>55</sup>

Because of his narrow victory and the fact that the SLP had mobilized significant numbers of German Republicans in a Republican city Harrison recognized that maintaining his majority required either bringing the Socialists directly into the Democratic Party or fostering a strong Socialist vote as a third force in upcoming elections. He also needed the support of four SLP aldermen in the closely divided city council. Accordingly, Harrison began almost immediately to openly court Socialist voters. In his inaugural address he defended their rights "to peaceably assemble," to "speak," and "to keep



and bear arms" "Some persons fear an organized resistance to authority in Chicago," observed Harrison, "I do not."<sup>56</sup>

Under Harrison the Democrats rebuilt the patronage and policy ties to the Socialist-led immigrant working class that had been severed earlier as a result of the rise of the Citizens Association. During his first term as mayor, Harrison appointed the defeated Schmidt to the Library Board, German Socialist politico Joe Gruenhut to the city's health department, and gave the city's printing to the SLP paper, *Arbeiter Zeitung*. When members of the Bohemian militia were arrested for firing at Irish toughs who had invaded their picnic, Harrison arranged for their immediate release and defused public clamor for retaliation. In June 1879 the SLP supported the reelection of Judge William McAllister, a Democrat, who had just declared the Vagrant Act unconstitutional. Large numbers of SLP voters split their tickets in the ensuing city elections of 1881. In the party's Fourteenth Ward stronghold, the SLP aldermanic candidate received 837 votes, while its mayoral rival to Harrison won only 231 votes. In the companion Sixteenth Ward, only 75 of 1,359 SLP voters cast ballots for the Socialist candidate for mayor. With the accession of the Socialist vote to Democratic totals, the city experienced an electoral realignment. Between 1857 and 1877, Republicans dominated all but two city elections; but from Harrison's election in 1879 through 1897, Democrats won seven of the ten mayoral elections, and two of the three Republican victories owed to a split in the Democratic vote.<sup>57</sup>

Harrison also mended his ties with Irish Bridgeport by appointing police officials sympathetic with the community. In one notable example, the Irish-born policeman John Byrne—who had resigned from the force in 1877, was reinstated by Harrison and elevated to a lieutenantcy. In the Bridgeport strikes of brickmakers, blast furnacemen, and iron ore shovelers during the early 1880s, Byrne's local police stayed neutral, allowing strikers to overawe and physically intimidate strikebreakers, much as they had done during the first two days of the 1877 strike. According to a biographical sketch of Byrne, during "many serious strikes among rolling mill employees and . . . other large strikes and threatened riots, [he] could accomplish better results with masses of determined and excited men by reasoning and persuasion than could be gained by any show of force." By 1885, the unwillingness of Harrison's police to protect strikebreakers had become notorious. A Citizens Association report observed that politicians found it advantageous "to calculate the probable effect of a prompt, bold, and determined attitude against a large body of defiant rioters who have ballots to cast."<sup>58</sup>

But Harrison could not have accumulated the political capital to renew major party ties with socialist-led workers had he not also satisfied the requirements of the city's business leaders and wealthy property holders for



efficient administration and relative immunity from taxation. In the same inaugural address that he defended socialist civil rights, he accepted the need to keep property taxes low by retrenching on city spending. Moreover, once in office, he appointed honest professionals rather than patronage hacks to head the fire department, the departments of public works and health, and, most important, the post of city comptroller, Chicago's financial czar. As a result, despite continued opposition from Citizen Association liberal reformers, whose solution to 1877 was an increase in the police force to be paid for by license fees on saloons, Harrison was able to garner the tolerance if not the support of most businessmen.<sup>59</sup>

In accommodating the needs of the propertied middle class, employers, the new immigrant working class, organized labor, and the city's diverse ethnic and religious groups, Carter Harrison forged a new kind of municipal politics in the city. In some ways it relied on the old "machine" approach to contentious issues. Thus, Harrison dealt with workers' strikes in the same way the old machine had dealt with the saloon and fire limit issues: by granting violators immunity from police enforcement of the law. But, Harrison also pioneered overt appeals to organized interest groups, including those hitherto excluded from respectability and power.<sup>60</sup> Thus, when multiethnic trade unions revived and grew during the 1880s prosperity, Harrison bargained with them. He also met the minimal reform needs of businessmen without acceding to the program of the Citizens Association. In that way his administration advanced the practice of democracy and marginalized the sort of antidemocratic ideology espoused by the liberals in the Citizens Association and practiced by the city's business establishment during the 1877 great upheaval. Harrison's regime thus demonstrated for the first time that rather than being locked in an irreconcilable conflict for supremacy, workers and capitalists, and Socialists and the Citizens Association, could coexist within the political system without either vanquishing the other.

Harrison's political solution to the crisis of the 1870s was at first precarious and vulnerable to conservative counterattack. In 1885, a renewed outrage at corruption, a revitalized antisaloon movement, and concern about the social costs of Harrison's tolerant policies toward the strikes of organized labor and the open meetings of the anarchists, revived class polarization and created the preconditions for the Haymarket Affair and another great upheaval. Nonetheless, after a short interval, Harrisonian accommodationist policies reasserted themselves in the mayor's office. The vote of the so-called dangerous classes, and the growing participation in government of its representatives along with that of organized labor, would prove enduring, setting the stage for the more well-known reforms of the Progressive Era.<sup>61</sup>

This account of the Chicago 1877 great upheaval argues for the necessity of



studying actions of workers in the context of developing class relations and shifting political ideologies and governing coalitions over an extended time period. Viewing it in this context has implications for the study of Gilded Age politics as well as labor history. There has been a curious disjuncture between Gilded Age political history and Gilded Age labor history. On the one hand, many labor historians argue that a powerful coalition of anti-labor employers and a repressive state apparatus repeatedly defeated important strikes and labor upheavals and steered the emerging labor movement away from radical challenges to capitalism.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, recent historians of Gilded Age politics have questioned older characterizations of its politics as corrupt, superficial, and out of touch with the "real" issues facing Americans. Instead, they have portrayed this political era as a 'complex and portentous time' and even as an "unheralded triumph."<sup>2</sup> The emergence of a socialist-led labor movement in Chicago, and the subsequent ascendancy of Carter Harrison and his approach to governance following the 1877 strikes, helps reconcile these divergent interpretations because it shows how the new labor movement not only retained but also expanded its power to reshape and revitalize democratic politics even as it faced its own limitations in the course of class conflict.

## Notes

1. Carl Abbott, *Boosters and Businessmen: Popular Economic Thought and Urban Growth in the Antebellum Middle West* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981), 19, 20, 65; David R. Meyer, 'Midwestern Industrialization and the American Manufacturing Belt in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of Economic History* 59 (December 1989): 921-35; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 60-61, 207-59, 307-8, figures on manufacturing scale compiled by the Chicago Working Class History Project from the 1850, 1860, and 1870 federal manuscript manufacturing censuses; Bruce Lurie and Mark Schmitz, 'Manufacturing and Productivity: The Making of an Industrial Base, Philadelphia, 1850-1880,' in *Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century: Essays toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City*, ed. Theodore Hershberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 43-92.

2. Figures on nationality from Chicago Working Class History Project, figures on Trades Assembly from *Chicago City Directory, 1864-65* (Chicago: John C. W. Bailey, 1865); workforce is defined as the same percentage of the population in 1865 as the workforce was in 1870; see Besiege Louis Pierce, *A History of Chicago: vol. 2: From Town to City, 1848-1871* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 151n4.

3. *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1871, October 14, 1871, October 15, 1871, October 18, 1871, October 20, 1871, January 16, 1872, January 17, 1872; Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chaps. 1-3.



4. *Chicago Tribune*, October 5, 1873, November 6, 1873; Michael L. Ahern, *The Great Revolution: A History of the Rise and Progress of the People's Party in the City of Chicago and County of Cook* (Chicago: Lakeside Publishing, 1874); Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, chap. 5.

5. *Der Deutsche Arbeiter*, August 28, 1869, July 25, 1870, August 1, 1870; John B. Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City: Chicago in the 1860s and 1870s," *Journal of Urban History* 17 (May 1991): 227-63; *Chicago Tribune*, December 23-28, 1873; January 1-7, 1874.

6. *Chicago Tribune*, July 16, 1874 (quote); Richard Schneirov, "Class Conflict, Municipal Politics, and Governmental Reform in Gilded Age Chicago, 1871-1875," in *German Workers in Industrial Chicago, 1850-1910: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. Hartmut Keil and John B. Jentz (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), 183-205.

7. "Address by Franklin MacVeagh, Sept. 11, 1874," in *Citizens Association of Chicago, Annual Reports, 1874-1901*, 1874 report (Chicago: Citizens Association of Chicago, 1901), 6; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

8. Richard Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics: Class Conflict and the Origins of Modern Liberalism in Chicago, 1864-97* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), chaps. 1 and 2.

9. *Chicago Tribune*, October 7, 1874, November 4, 1874; January 3, 1875, March 17, 1875; April 24, 1875, June 29, 1875; Schneirov, "Class Conflict and Governmental Reform in Chicago," 196-98; Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 2:300-304.

10. *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1876; June 6, 1876; July 13, 1876.

11. Martin Shefter, "Regional Receptivity to Reform: The Legacy of the Progressive Era," *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (autumn 1983): 459-83.

12. On the typographers, see *Workingman's Advocate*, January 30, 1869; February 18, 1871, September 5, 1874; on the stonecutters, see February 27, 1869, May 10, 1870, September 7, 1872, May 10, 1872, January 16, 1876; on the decline of Trade Assembly, see September 19, 1868, April 17, 1869, May 1, 1869, June 19, 1869; on movement culture, see *Workingman's Advocate*, January 8, 1876; *Chicago Tribune*, June 17, 1878; Bruce C. Nelson, *Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchists, 1870-1900* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 146-52; Vernon Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

13. *Chicago Tribune*, July 1, 1877.

14. Robert V. Bruce, 1877: *Year of Violence* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970), 33-42; Philip S. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877* (New York: Monad Press, 1977), Prologue.

15. *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1877; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 23, 1877.

16. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 106-14; George A. Schilling, "A History of the Labor Movement in Chicago," in *Life of Albert R. Parsons with Brief History of the Labor Movement in America: Also Sketches of the Lives of A. Spies, Geo. Engel, A. Fischer and Louis Lingg*, ed. Lucy E. Parsons (Chicago: Lucy E. Parsons, 1903), xxii.

17. *Chicago Tribune*, July 22, 1877.



18. Ibid., July 23, 1877; Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 115–17.
19. *Chicago Tribune*, July 23, 1877; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 23, 1877.
20. *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1874.
21. Ibid.; Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 218–24.
22. John J. Flinn, *History of the Chicago Police from the Settlement of the Community to the Present Time* (Chicago: Police Book Fund, 1887), 162; There were widely varying estimates of the crowd. The *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1877, mentioned six thousand; the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 24, 1877, claimed thirty thousand; Schilling, in "A History of the Labor Movement in Chicago," xxvi, claimed forty thousand.
23. A text of part of the speech was reprinted in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 26, 1877.
24. *Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 1877.
25. *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 25, 1875; *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1877; a similar description of the crowd was given by Chicago historian Bessie Louis Pierce in her *A History of Chicago*, vol. 3: *The Rise of a Modern City, 1871–1893* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 248. However, the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 28, 1877, reported: "It must be admitted that when the mob was attacked, except in one or two instances, they were attacked for assembling in crowds and not for any unlawful acts they were committing."
26. Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 32–33, 38–39; Richard Schneirov and Thomas J. Suhrbur, *Union Brotherhood, Union Town: The History of the Carpenters' Union of Chicago, 1863–1987* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 9–10, 13–14, 15, 16, 17.
27. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 157–87.
28. *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1877; *Chicago Times*, July 25, 1877.
29. Unless otherwise noted, the descriptions of the crowd on this day are composites based on the July 25, 1877, editions of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, *Chicago Times*, and *Chicago Evening Journal*.
30. *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1877 (quote); *Chicago Times*, July 25, 1877 (quote).
31. *Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1877; "Autobiography of Albert Parsons" in Parsons, *Life of Albert Parsons*, 18–19.
32. *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1877.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., July 25, 1877, July 26, 1877, July 27, 1877.
35. Unless otherwise noted, the descriptions of the crowd on this day are composites based on the July 26, 1877, editions of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, *Chicago Times*, and *Chicago Evening Journal*.
36. *Chicago Tribune*, July 26, 1877.
37. Ibid.
38. *Chicago Times*, July 26, 1877.
39. Unless otherwise noted, the descriptions of the crowd on this day are composites based on the July 27, 1877, editions of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Inter Ocean*, *Chicago Times*, and *Chicago Evening Journal*.
40. *Chicago Times*, July 27, 1877.
41. Of the total of thirty-five whose addresses could be ascertained, eleven riot victims came from the Fifth Ward, thirteen from the Sixth Ward, eight from the Seventh Ward, two from the Eighth Ward, and one from the Thirteenth Ward.



42. Figures are based on a sample of one in five heads of family, yielding 2,089 heads of family; see Federal Manuscript Census Schedules, Chicago, Sixth Ward, Roll 89.

43. Letter published in *Chicago Inter Ocean*, July 28, 1877, from J. Oliverius, editor of Bohemian newspaper, *Vestník*; Richard Schneirov, "Free Thought and Socialism in the Czech Community in Chicago, 1875-1887," in *"Struggle a Hard Battle": Essays on Working-Class Immigrants*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986), 121-42.

44. Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, chap. 4; *Chicago Tribune*, February 14, 1875; a list of 132 arrestees was checked for birthplace in Richard Edwards, *Chicago Census Report and Statistical Review* (Chicago: Edwards and Co., 1871).

45. *Chicago Tribune*, July 27, 1877 (quote); see also descriptions in the *Chicago Times* and *Chicago Inter Ocean*.

46. *Chicago Tribune*, July 27, 1877; *Chicago Times*, July 27, 1877; *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1877.

47. *Illinois Staats Zeitung*, April 25, 1879; April 26, 1879; *Chicago Tribune*, July 27, 1877; July 29, 1877; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, May 6, 1879; John Peter Altgeld, "Reasons for Pardoning Fielden, Neebe, and Schwab, the So-Called Anarchists," in *The Mind and Spirit of John Peter Altgeld, Selected Writings and Addresses*, ed. Henry M. Christman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 58-59.

48. A figure of twenty-eight deaths was compiled from lists in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Times*, and *Chicago Inter Ocean*. Flinn, *Chicago Police*, 199, listed thirty-five dead; the figure of two hundred wounded is from Howard Myers, "The Policing of Labor Disputes in Chicago: A Case Study" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1929), 117, 118.

49. *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 1877; Beckert, *Monied Metropolis*, 183-92, 211-36; Larry Isaac, "To Counter 'The Very Devil' and More: The Making of Independent Capitalist Militia in the Gilded Age," *American Journal of Sociology* 108 (September 2002): 353-405.

50. *Workingman's Advocate*, May 19, 1877; *Knights of Labor*, January 29, 1887. For a national survey of the emergence of a working-class presence in the 1870s, see Sean Wilentz in "The Rise of the American Working Class, 1776-1877" in *Perspectives on American Labor History: The Problems of Synthesis*, eds. J Carroll Moody and Alice Kessler-Harris (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 83-151, esp. 118-34.

51. Foner, *The Great Labor Uprising of 1877*, 227; *Chicago Inter Ocean*, December 2, 1877; *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 1877, December 16, 1877; Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 84-86.

52. *Irish World and American Industrial Liberator*, October 4, 1879; *Progressive Age*, October 18, 1879, January 3, 1880, November 12, 1881 (quote); Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 106-10.

53. Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 81-84.

54. *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 1878, April 26, 1878 (quote), April 28, 1878, May 12, 1878; Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 3:252-55.

55. *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 1879; on Harrison and the Germans, see the translated interview with editor of the *Neus Freie-Press*, July 2, 1879.

56. *Ibid.*, April 29, 1879.

57. Ernst Schmidt, *He Chose: The Other Was a Treadmill Thing*, ed. and trans. Frederick R. Schmidt (Santa Fe, N.M.: Vegara, 1968), 122-23; *Chicago Tribune*, June 7, 1879, June 25,



1879, July 7, 1879, October 28, 1879, April 18, 1879, September 3, 1880, April 5, 1881, April 6, 1881, April 7, 1881, September 8, 1885; *Chicago Times*, August 28, 1884; Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 3:352-54, 356, 379-80, 539. The presence of a large number of German voters able to swing between the two parties over labor issues seems to have been a major factor in the Democratic Party's receptivity to labor demands in many Gilded Age cities, not just Chicago. See David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United State with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 152-53.

58. Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 110-13; Charles French, *Biographical History of the American Irish in Chicago* (Chicago: American Biographical Publishing, 1897), 790-92; Citizens Association, *Annual Reports*, 1885, 21.

59. *Chicago Tribune*, May 14, 1879, April 5, 1883; Pierce, *History of Chicago*, 3:360; Jon C. Teaford, *Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 56, 60-64; Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 60-63; 162-68.

60. Claudius O. Johnson, *Carter Harrison I: A Political Leader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 150.

61. Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*, 162-79, 275-84, 287-88, and 366-70.

62. See, notably, Gerald Friedman, "The State and the Making of the Working Class: France and the United States, 1880-1914," *Theory and Society* 17 (1988): 403-30; Leon Fink, "The New Labor History and the Powers of Historical Pessimism: Consensus, Hegemony, and the Case of the Knights of Labor," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 115-36; Kim Voss, *The Making of American Exceptionalism: The Knights of Labor and Class Formation in the Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Victoria Hattam, *Labor Visions and State Power: The Origins of Business Unionism in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993). Beckert's *Monied Metropolis* also argues that New York workers were locked out of power in the Gilded Age.

63. Teaford, *Unheralded Triumph*; Vincent De Santis, "The Gilded Age in American History," *Hayes Historical Journal* 7 (1988): 38-41; Philip J. Ethington, *The Public City: The Political Construction of Urban Life in San Francisco, 1850-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Charles W. Calhoun, "The Political Culture: Public Life and the Conduct of Politics" in *The Gilded Age: Essays on the Origins of Modern America*, ed. Charles W. Calhoun (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 185-213; Schneirov, *Labor and Urban Politics*.